

From the Director



Ian Bird, PhD
Program
Director

It is my great pleasure to write this first message in our newsletter celebrating the run up to our 50th anniversary.

As you may know the proposal for a program in Endocrinology was formally submitted in January 1959 by Drs. LE Casida (Genetics), ES Gordon (Medicine), WH Mc Shan (Zoology) and RK Meyer (Zoology). In the very beginning this was an Interdepartmental Training program encompassing themes from both basic and clinical science and while it has changed its name and focus periodically as funding opportunities and Directors came and went, ERP still remains to this day a truly Interdepartmental Program.

At the time I became Director in 2000, I was fortunate enough to be joined by our current Program Administrator Tiffany Bachmann, MA.

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The ordinary and extraordinary

"I spent five of the best years of my life here."

That was how Dr. Charles "Pat" McCormack introduced himself to a room of Endocrinology-Reproductive Physiology students at the first of a series of alumni lectures leading up to the program's 50th anniversary.

McCormack (PhD '63) is currently a professor and vice chair of the department of physiology and biophysics at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in Chicago, Illinois. He spent the first 25 years of his post-doctoral life maintaining a productive research program in neuroendocrinology, publishing numerous papers on the control of the ovulation-inducing luteinizing hormone (LH) surge, the timing of ovulation and seasonal reproduction. In 1987, McCormack stepped away from active research when he was asked to take on extended teaching responsibilities and continues to teach today.

His remarks, however, focused on his experiences as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in 1959, as one of the first students in the ERP program. McCormack was one of 15 graduate students working under



L-R: Tiffany Bachmann, Dr. Charles "Pat" McCormack, Mrs. McCormack and Dr. Ian Bird

Professor RK Meyer. Within two weeks of joining the program in June, he had a cage of rats and a challenge: to study LH-releasing hormones.

"RK got me started on a project that was not productive, but he let me work on it to the point when I could find a direction that was productive," McCormack said. "A lot of things are discovered serendipitously. It was true then and it still is today."

McCormack's research led him to his doctoral project, the study of progesterone's effect on LH secretion. After completing his work at the UW, he was hired by the University of Chicago, where he began his work on LH release and circadian rhythms.

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Together our first priority was to re-establish a grant funding base for the program and students. With a great deal of persistence, lots of late night coffee and, of course, the considerable research credentials of the current faculty (see erp.wisc.edu), we were able to successfully gain a Predoctoral T32 award from NICHD in the areas of reproduction and women's health. This was funded in 2003 and scored at the 0% level, which is a true credit to those involved and shows the students and faculty of this program continue to be of the highest quality. One of the main comments noted in the NIH review as a major strength was that ERP is still a truly interdisciplinary faculty body. During the recent period of funding we have seen progressive increases in our applicant pool, both in numbers and quality, and our program graduates continue to be placed in leading institutions. We will give more information on this in future newsletters.

During the period of application for T32 funding we also underwent a ten-year review by the graduate school. One comment from them I took great pleasure in reading was that the students were unusually bright and enthusiastic, a sentiment I also recently heard echoed by our first alumni speaker Dr. C. "Pat" McCormack following his visit on Oct 4th.

As I mentioned in a previous alumni email, as we enjoy this moment of relative stability we are taking the time to reach out. There are several reasons for this and one obvious reason is simply the collective celebration of our upcoming anniversary. We feel it is important for our current students to know the rich heritage that they share with past graduates. For that reason we have initiated a **50th Anniversary Lecture Series**, which we began with Dr. McCormack. This was a particularly appropriate choice for first speaker since he was one of the first Predoctoral Trainees of the program beginning in 1959 and worked with program founder RK Meyer.

Graduate training programs today face constant challenge, with the current NIH budget situation and the general pressures of campuses, but I remain optimistic. The NIH Road map has made it clear the focus on translational research is here to stay. Fortunately ERP has retained and increased significant alliances with both clinical and basic departments, as well as researchers in the focus areas of NICHD, and we plan to expand that in the areas covered by NIDDK. UW-Madison has recently been awarded an NIH CTSA grant under the leadership of Marc Drezner, MD, and this is now being formalized in the creation of the Institute for Clinical and Translational Research (ICTR).

Several of our recent graduates are now in Medical or Vet School. We are also currently training MD Fellows alongside our Predoctoral PhD trainees, and this is working very well for both groups. It is our hope to expand these initiatives further in the coming year, and I will give more details as the story unfolds.

The interdepartmental alliances forged back in 1959 have not only endured but grown and now place us in a very strong position to take on the challenges of the next 50 years. I find it ironic that I have been commended recently for following this path that is considered on 'the cutting edge' yet I am in fact just continuing a theme that the founders of the program realized well ahead of their time. I have every reason to believe ERP will continue to be a vibrant program that is well positioned to handle the challenges of the future. This is a great position from which to look forward to our 50th year celebrations.

McCORMACK, CONTINUED

Today's researcher, McCormack noted, faces the same challenge but in a different environment.

"Research today is much more expensive and encumbered," he said. "The administrative details make it more difficult to pursue collaborative work, and take away valuable time."

But he encouraged the students in attendance to continue to pursue their work.

"If Dr. Meyer had an idea, he didn't let it go unless he knew it was absolutely wrong," McCormack said. "Good discoveries are made by very ordinary people, but only if they stick with them."

50th Anniversary Lecture Series lecturers include...

11/8/07: Dr. Tanja Dominko, Worcester Polytech & CellThera

11/15/07: Dr. Scott Walsh, Virginia Commonwealth University

3/13/08: Dr. David Miller, University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign

4/10/08: Dr. Ramesh Bhalla, University of Iowa

4/17/08: Dr. Robert Dailey, University of West Virginia

All lectures are held from 3-4 p.m. in room 1360, Biotechnology Bldg, 425 Henry Mall in Madison.

Alumni survey

As we prepare for our 50th anniversary, we would like to know more about you, our alumni. With each of our newsletters this academic year, we'll include a brief survey on your ERP experience. We hope you'll share your thoughts as we look to continuously improve and strengthen this groundbreaking program!

1. In what year did you graduate from the ERP program? _____
2. Which of the following best describes your current employment?
 - ☐ Academic institution - teaching
 - ☐ Academic institution - research
 - ☐ Private sector research
 - ☐ Private sector consultation
 - ☐ Public service/nonprofit organization
 - ☐ Health Care/clinical services
 - ☐ Veterinary care/clinical services
 - ☐ Student/pursuing additional education
 - ☐ Other: _____
3. In what state (if US) or country (if non-US) do you currently work? _____
4. Which faculty did you primarily work with when you were a student in the ERP program? _____

5. If you have a story or memory of your experiences here that you are willing to share, please use the space below:

If you would like to receive future newsletters via emailed PDF, please list your email address here:

If you prefer, you may email your responses to Tiffany Bachmann at tabachmann@wisc.edu. Otherwise, please return your survey to:

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Thank you for your assistance!